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## **BMA to Present First Major Museum Exhibition on the Complex and Poignant Work of Darrel Ellis**

***Darrel Ellis: Regeneration* to feature major bodies of the artist's work, capturing his distinctive photographic style and vision to recast Black identity**

BALTIMORE, MD (July 20, 2022)—On November 20, the Baltimore Museum of Art (BMA) will open the first comprehensive museum exhibition on the profoundly moving and complex work of Darrel Ellis (1958-1992). Over the course of his brief career, Ellis developed a distinct studio practice that merged the formal vocabularies of drawing, photography, painting, and printmaking to redefine Black male identity and family within the constructs of art history and mainstream culture. Ellis was influential during his life, inspiring the work of other artists and featuring in a range of significant contemporary surveys, but his career was cut short by his early death at the age of 33 due to AIDS-related causes. *Darrel Ellis: Regeneration* examines the full arc of Ellis's career through approximately 60 works on paper, including a historically significant body of work that captures the experiences and public perceptions of Black men living with the AIDS virus, as well as an expansive group of portraits of his family members that offer a record of Black domestic life. On view through April 23, 2023, the presentation also reveals the results of the most comprehensive technical study of Ellis's singular process and features archival materials that provide new insights into the artist's life and work.

*Darrel Ellis: Regeneration* is co-organized by the BMA and the Bronx Museum of the Arts, and is co-curated by Leslie Cozzi, the BMA's Curator for Prints, Drawings & Photographs, and Antonio Sergio Bessa, Chief Curator Emeritus at the Bronx Museum. Following its presentation at the BMA, it will open at the Bronx Museum in May 2023. The exhibition is accompanied by a fully illustrated catalogue with essays by the exhibition curators as well as by Dr. Makeda Best, Richard L. Menschel Curator of Photography at the Harvard Art Museums, who examines Ellis's practice in the context of historical and conceptual photography, and by photographer and friend Allen Frame, who creates a timeline of Ellis's important relationships with other artists. Together, the exhibition and catalogue offer the most extensive scholarly examination of Ellis's work and enduring influence to date.

"Although Darrel Ellis died in 1992, before the tidal wave of images produced by the internet, his work engaged with the ways that images in our contemporary culture are produced, reproduced, and can take on a life of their own. Photography can capture and preserve memories, but it can also distort our lives and appearances. His paintings, drawings, and photographs delve into this paradox of familiarity and alienation that is so central to our image-saturated culture," said Cozzi. "This

exhibition explores the technical virtuosity of Ellis's practice, while also illuminating how this pioneering artist responded to the post-modern impetus to merge art and life in the most arresting and unique way."

To produce his groundbreaking images, Ellis shifted across a wide range of media, employing painting, printmaking, drawing, sculpture, and collage to generate endless variations on a single image. This often involved projecting photographic negatives onto sculpted reliefs, obscuring areas, and re-photographing the results. He also leveraged protrusions and recesses to disrupt the continuity of his projected surfaces, blocking and blurring areas of the image, and experimented with post-production color tints and ink washes, producing painterly effects on the photographs. To further examine the singularity of Ellis's process, BMA conservators Scott Homolka and Linda Owen conducted the first sustained technical study of the artist's work. An in-gallery model will recreate his projection methods, plaster reliefs, and negative/positive transformations. Their results will also be featured in a catalogue essay that highlights how Ellis produced "generations" of artworks from one source photographic image.

Ellis's unforgettable body of work is further distinguished in the ways that it intertwines the artist's individual and familial history with the broader experiences and representations of Black men. His raw source material was often drawn from his father's negatives. Thomas Ellis was a gifted photographer and postal clerk who was killed by plainclothes police less than two months before Darrel's birth. The wrongful death was never acknowledged in court and the tragic event shaped Ellis's life and artistic path. The exhibition includes a wide range of variations of family portraits, including pictures of Ellis' mother, father, sister, grandparents, and great-uncle. This series frames Ellis's idiosyncratic form of appropriation and engagement with photography as a document of family history.

Ellis's approach extended to his self-portraits, which reframed stereotypes of the social and physical costs of the AIDS virus. Also included are Ellis's reinterpretations of portraits of himself modelling for artists such as Peter Hujar, Allen Frame, and Robert Mapplethorpe. Other examples of Ellis's works highlight the ways in which he appropriates and reframes Eurocentric representations of domesticity and interior space.

"Darrel Ellis's work is essential to our understanding of the evolution of contemporary art as well as within our broader social and political dialogues about sexuality and identity. We are delighted to partner with the Bronx Museum in presenting this comprehensive survey of Ellis's oeuvre, which adds significant scholarship about the artist and builds on the acclaim that he received in his lifetime," said Asma Naeem, the BMA's Interim Co-Director and the Eddie C. and C. Sylvia Brown Chief Curator. "This presentation also connects beautifully with the BMA's concurrent presentation *A Movement in Every Direction*, which also examines familial histories, selfhood, and the construction of identity through the work of 12 contemporary Black artists exploring the history and impact of the Great Migration. These exhibitions are part of the BMA's vision to explore narratives and experiences of deep personal and communal meaning."

## **Darrel Ellis**

Darrel Ellis grew up in the Bronx and graduated from Fashion Industries High School, attended classes at Cooper Union and the School of Visual Arts, and participated in the Whitney Independent Study Program. Throughout his career, Ellis participated in more than 20 group exhibitions in New York and Europe, including the 1989 exhibition *Witnesses: Against Their Vanishing* organized by Nan Goldin and the touring exhibition *The Surrogate Figure: Intercepted Identities in Contemporary Art* organized by The Center for Photography at Woodstock. His work garnered critical acclaim and in 1991, a year before his death, he received a New York Foundation for the Arts Fellowship Award. His work was posthumously featured in the Museum of Modern Art's *New Photography 8* exhibition in 1992. While Ellis was an integral member of the downtown New York art scene, it is only now that his work is receiving the depth of study that it truly deserves. A touring retrospective of Ellis's work was organized by Allen Frame at Art in General in 1996 and the upcoming presentation of *Darrel Ellis: Regeneration* marks the first major museum exhibition of his work.

## **Baltimore Museum of Art**

Founded in 1914, the Baltimore Museum of Art (BMA) inspires people of all ages and backgrounds through exhibitions, programs, and collections that tell an expansive story of art—challenging long-held narratives and embracing new voices. Our outstanding collection of more than 95,000 objects spans many eras and cultures and includes the world's largest public holding of works by Henri Matisse; one of the nation's finest collections of prints, drawings, and photographs; and a rapidly growing number of works by contemporary artists of diverse backgrounds. The museum is also distinguished by a neoclassical building designed by American architect John Russell Pope and two beautifully landscaped gardens featuring an array of modern and contemporary sculpture. The BMA is located three miles north of the Inner Harbor, adjacent to the main campus of Johns Hopkins University, and has a community branch at Lexington Market. General admission is free so that everyone can enjoy the power of art.

## **Visitor Information**

General admission to the BMA is free. The BMA is open Wednesday through Sunday from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., with extended hours on Thursdays until 9 p.m. Timed reservations are required for all visitors to the galleries. The Sculpture Gardens are open Wednesday through Sunday, 10 a.m. to dusk. The museum and gardens are closed New Year's Day, Juneteenth, July 4, Thanksgiving Day, and Christmas Day. The BMA is located at 10 Art Museum Drive, three miles north of Baltimore's Inner Harbor. For general museum information, call 443-573-1700 or visit [artbma.org](http://artbma.org).

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